

Morally wrong

The Education Act of 1944 requires state schools to begin each day with an "act of worship" and to give undenominational religious instruction on the basis of a syllabus agreed locally by representatives of churches, the teachers and the Local Education Authority. Parents are given the right to have their children excused from the act of worship and/or religious instruction. Teachers are not compelled either to attend worship or to give RI. Although it is not specifically stated in the Act, "religious instruction" is assumed to mean instruction in Christian beliefs.

These religious provisions have been described by a former Minister of Education* as 'the best hope we could see of repairing the moral damage of the war'. But, he went on, this hope, 'that British morals could be kept in repair by making religion in schools compulsory, has been a failure'.

PROBLEMS

Serious problems have developed. Christian beliefs no longer carry conviction for the nation as a whole. Many thoughtful and responsible people are in grave doubt about the truth of these doctrines. They are regarded as no more "true" than beliefs about political systems. We do not teach any particular political beliefs as being "true beyond doubt"; but at school children are by law instructed in Christian beliefs not only as though they were certainly true, but also as though their truth were generally accepted. This is a false position. It can only lead to moral confusion in the growing child and is all the more regrettable as it is now widely agreed that there is a common pool of human moral principles which need not in any way be based on religious beliefs.

Again, although parents who are not Christians have the right to have their children excused from RI and the act of worship, they may be unwilling thus to isolate their children. In modern primary schools excusal is particularly difficult, as sessions may not be divided up into set lessons, with the result that the statutory religious instruction may be fitted in at any time. And, despite their legal rights under the Act, teachers who are not believers are under strong pressure to conform for the sake of their careers. The whole atmosphere of a school may be poisoned by this hypocrisy, which is always evident to the children. Staff relations may themselves be made more difficult by the pressure to maintain the pretence.

This handicap on the schools is quite unnecessary. Even Christians are unhappy about it. It serves the interests neither of the children nor of the parents, who, as a National Opinion Poll has shown, are very much more concerned with their children becoming adults with kindly and helpful natures and a sense of right and wrong than they are with their becoming convinced Christians. Besides, it is dangerous to link moral education with a particular set of beliefs because, if children come to reject the beliefs—which most do—they are likely to reject the moral values as well.

* Viscount Eccles, House of Lords debate, 15th November 1967

MORAL EDUCATION

To teach children *about* religion obviously has a place in education, but to impose on them a particular set of beliefs in which only a minority now actually believe *cannot* be good moral education. Once the imposition of religious instruction is removed, the way will be open for a system of moral education based on general education (including teaching *about* religion), on free discussion of problem-situations, and on the community life of the school. This will unite staff and pupils in common tasks and ideals, while respecting, without emphasizing, the differences of conviction that exist in society today. Such a system of moral education will be more honest and educationally sounder than that established by the 1944 Education Act. It will prepare children better for responsible adult life in our complex and changing society.

ACTION FOR CHANGE

The present law is a failure. To persevere with it is an appalling irresponsibility. What the community needs is an entirely new approach. The British Humanist Association is campaigning vigorously for reform, but we need your support. This is what you can do:

See for yourself; write to your children's Headteacher(s) asking to be allowed to come in occasionally to the act of worship. Tell him—and us—what you think of it.

Ask your children if they would like to be withdrawn from the act of worship and/or religious instruction. If so, write to their Headteacher and tell him. No need to give reasons—your right is absolute.

Organise protests in your own groups (the BHA may be able to help you with a speaker). Teachers can raise the question in their Unions and at Teachers' Centres.

Send for copies of this leaflet (£5.00 per 1,000; 60p per 100 post paid from the BHA) and distribute them.

Write to your MP, your Local Education Authority, the Department of Education and Science (Curzon Street, London W.1) calling for a new approach.

Write to the local newspapers and the national press.

Ask us for more background information (we have plenty, including details of how moral education can be handled at schools). Tell us what you are doing: maybe we can help.

Join the British Humanist Association and support our campaign. For details of membership and other enquiries, write to the address below.

STOP THE DRIFT TO CONFUSION



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